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SUBJECT: AN OVERVIEW OF NORTHERN THAILAND-BASED BURMESE MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS

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¶1. SUMMARY. Increasing numbers of Burma-centric media organizations operate out of Chiang Mai, creating a dynamic community of exile journalists that produces a diverse and relatively reliable stream of information for Burma watchers both inside Burma and living abroad. Shut out from Burma by the military junta's tight censorship and persecution of journalists, these organizations find that northern Thailand offers a convenient roost from which to observe events on the ground in Burma and transmit information into their home country. However, as exiles living in a foreign land these journalists face security and legal challenges as they attempt to build lasting institutions for a free press that cannot exist under the current government in their own country. End Summary.

A Nexus for Burmese Exile Media

¶2. Chiang Mai has long served as a nexus for the Burmese exile community - it is one of the closest population centers to Burma's border areas and northern Thailand's growing number of refugees, migrants, and exiles provides a local audience for Burmese media and NGOs as well. In recent years, the Burmese NGO presence has expanded, presenting new opportunities for these fledgling Burmese media in exile to improve the quality of their reporting and the reach of their distribution.

¶3. Despite the generally friendly climate in Thailand, these organizations face significant challenges. Most Burmese journalists working in northern Thailand do not have legal residence status and do not speak fluent Thai. Exile groups must remain in the good graces of their Thai hosts, particularly security agencies, especially as they sometimes skirt immigration and business ownership regulations. Some organizations go so far as to feed information to the RTG's National Intelligence Agency - one journalist shrugged off this potential ethical conflict by noting that "we're both in the business of collecting news."

¶4. Burma watchers throughout the international community point to northern Thailand-based media as among their most reliable and detailed sources for news out of Burma. Despite the relative inexperience of many journalists working on the border, as well as some of their organizations' own political agendas, most observers see the reporting as generally accurate. Exile reporters also strive to maintain close contact with journalists operating inside Burma, who although they must bear government

censorship, are often able to better develop reliable sources through more frequent and direct contact. The news gathered by these internal Burmese reporters eventually filters out into the exile journalism community and then into the larger international media.

Media Organizations

15. THE IRRAWADDY. The crown jewel of the local Burmese media community is The Irrawaddy (www.irrawaddy.org), founded in 1992 by former student dissident Aung Zaw. The English-language Irrawaddy has grown substantially from its humble beginnings as a largely volunteer-driven publication, and now operates on a \$700,000 annual budget with some 30 paid staff members. In addition to a monthly magazine, its website features daily updates and it runs its own in-house journalism training program for new staff. The Irrawaddy maintains active sources inside Burma and its generally thorough editing standards result in better overall accuracy than its counterparts, according to many Burma media consumers.

16. The Irrawaddy receives funding from a variety of sources, including annual National Endowment for Democracy (NED) grants that usually account for some 20 percent of its budget. However, with a growing staff and a market eager to consume more news on Burma, Irrawaddy managers told the Consulate they are looking to diversify their funding pool with more grants from European governments.

17. DEMOCRATIC VOICE OF BURMA. The Norway-based Democratic Voice of Burma (www.dvb.no), also founded in 1992, moved its Thailand headquarters to Chiang Mai last year and also maintains a bureau in Mae Sot. DVB produces radio and television newscasts for Burmese exiles and broadcasts its programs to audiences inside Burma, achieving a radio listenership surpassed only by BBC and Voice of America (VOA) and matched by Radio Free Asia

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(RFA). Embassy Rangoon notes that these four radio services supply many Burmese with their daily news, exceeding the capacity for print and other media to reach the general population.

18. DVB currently produces twice-daily hour-long radio news segments and one-hour satellite television programming on weekends. A DVB editor based in Chiang Mai said the proliferation of cheap Chinese radios in Burma had increased its potential radio audience, although he admitted the group's official estimate of 10 million television viewers based on 2 million satellite customers seemed overly optimistic. Other estimates peg the number of satellite dishes in Burma at no more than 100,000.

19. In addition to a small NED grant and support from the Norwegian government, DVB receives funding from several other Europe-based organizations and governments. Local Chiang Mai staff includes ethnic Burmese, Karen, and Kachin, along with a Western reporter. DVB is using its Chiang Mai office to develop sources in the border region and also to improve distribution of its products inside Burma.

10. MIZZIMA. New Delhi-based Mizzima (www.mizzima.com) is another exile media organization that has recently expanded to open a formal presence in northern Thailand. Mizzima journalists focus on gathering news from inside Burma via networks of sources on the Burmese borders with India, Bangladesh, Thailand, and China. Mizzima employees said the company publishes 2,600 copies of a monthly journal targeted mainly at the Burmese diaspora, while its website gets 3,000 visitors per day.

11. The multi-lingual Mizzima has also been working on TV production since 2002, cooperating with VOA, DVB, RFA, and BBC Burmese. In 2004 it located four of its 35 staff members in Chiang Mai. It uses internship positions to develop and train

journalists and also encourages staff to network with Thai and Indian journalists covering Burma. The overall organization attracts funding from a number of sources including NED, although the Canadian government is the primary supporter for the Chiang Mai office.

¶12. ETHNIC MEDIA. In addition to exile media organizations that attempt to cover all aspects of Burma's politics and current events, several ethnic groups have focused resources on maintaining their own media outlets for specific coverage of their own interests. Groups such as the Shan, Kachin, and Karen have developed their own media networks based largely in northern Thailand. The ethnic media are popular in border areas where audiences are more receptive to media in their own languages than English or Burmese. Also, a perception that the major exile media groups are dominated by the majority Burman perspective leads some ethnics to shun those media, say some journalists.

¶13. Founded in 1996, the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN - www.shanland.org) reports in four languages (Burmese, Shan, Thai, and English) out of its Chiang Mai office. Media include a website, with daily updates and 400-plus hits per day, and the monthly Independence journal, which dates back to a 1974 newsletter put out by Shan activists. SHAN's coverage has a significant focus on illegal drug trafficking and finds an audience among academics, NGOs, and foreign governments. Its staff includes four permanent positions and several part-time help and freelance stringers who operate in both Thailand and Burma.

¶14. Many non-Shan Burmese exiles and citizens (as well as the SPDC) do not differentiate between SHAN and ethnic Shan political groups resisting the military junta, such as the Shan State Army-South. Although SHAN Editor-in-Chief Khuensai Jaiyen told PolOff that SHAN journalists had moved beyond armed political resistance, their tone remains distinctly activist: "We started out as fighters and still are, but in the past we used guns. Now we fight with the truth." Still, SHAN does not keep formal ties with any political organization. Other media groups with a presence in northern Thailand, such as the Burma Independent News Agency, Karen Information Center, Karen Students Network Group, and the Kachin News Group have more readily apparent connections to political organizations representing ethnic or political resistance groups.

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Associations and Support Organizations

¶15. With the growing community of media organizations here, many groups have banded together or sought to further expand their network of contacts, and several umbrella groups and associations have likewise established a presence in Chiang Mai. Organizations such as the Bangkok-based South East Asian Press Alliance (www.seapa.org) and Washington-based Burmese Media Association (www.bma-online.org) have helped organize annual conferences in Chiang Mai over the past three years and have pooled resources for cross-organization journalism training. Faced with limited budgets and the challenges of operating in a foreign country, many of the smaller exile organizations can turn to these umbrella groups for assistance with legal and security issues. SEAPA also provides a connection to the larger Asian press, creating the potential for exile reporting to reach larger audiences and influence opinions among Burma's neighbors.

Equipping the Next Generation of Burmese Media

¶16. A number of active media training programs attract exiles and those from inside Burma to Chiang Mai for journalism courses ranging from one week to one year. These training programs identify would-be journalists who are active in communities inside Burma, as well as NGOs in Thailand, and help them secure reporting positions with Burmese media outfits in the region.

The training programs help ensure that future generations will be able to succeed the founders of the current organizations.

¶17. International NGO Internews began training Burmese journalists in Thailand in 2000 and opened an office in Chiang Mai two years later. Internews focuses on basic journalism, business management, and media design. Local staff members manage a one-year training program for approximately 15 students per term. Of the program's 55 alumni, about 70 percent work as active journalists. Nearly all local exile publications boast at least one graduate of the program.

¶18. Other organizations, some with a scope beyond Burma, also add to the educational opportunities for Burmese journalists. The Chiang Mai-based Indochina Media Memorial Foundation, for instance, last year completed training courses for Southeast Asian reporters that included Burmese participants. Major funders for journalism training programs in the region include the NED, Open Society Institute (OSI), and several European governments and charities.

Distribution

¶19. Journalists say that many people in Burma must elude strict SPDC media controls and beware potential persecution against anyone caught distributing magazines, pamphlets, or CDs - thus creating major barriers to media access. Moreover, many Burmese do not have access to the technology needed to access electronic media. The junta's policies have prevented any large-scale distribution of exile media, but some organizations have found success with smaller operations.

¶20. Groups such as SHAN mail materials to contacts in southern China, who then bring newsletters and CDs into Shan State and elsewhere. SHAN and other exile groups told PolOff they feel Burma's border with China is less closely monitored for political activity than in Thailand. While Thailand offers a freer environment for journalists than what they could find in China, the SPDC keeps such a close watch over the Thai-Burma border that many contacts do not want to risk a crossing there carrying banned media.

¶21. As long as their scope remains small, most journalists say they are able to get their product into Burma. A Mizzima representative said her organization disguises CD-ROMs of radio and television news programs as pirated American movie DVDs, while others send their publications via ConGen Chiang Mai or Embassy Bangkok to Embassy Rangoon for distribution via the American Center. The American Center also produces daily news clippings from dissident media organizations, inviting visitors to see reports that ordinarily might not reach local audiences. DVB staff said they have begun using opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) members to help distribute materials through their networks inside Burma.

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¶22. Many exile journalists said they were successfully reaching the Burmese public and even lower-ranking government officials. A DVB television editor said he was able to get officials at Insein Prison to comment off-the-record on new arrivals and the health of long-term political prisoners. For the most part, though, engaging with their targeted audience and creating an open public forum for discussion remains an elusive goal.

Activism vs. Journalism

¶23. As exiles, most of the Burmese journalists living in Thailand don't see themselves as impartial observers to the events in their homeland. Many are current or former members of opposition groups such as the NLD, All Burma Students' Democratic Front, and Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. Some media organizations try to maintain barriers

between their operations and the leadership of political groups, while training in journalism fundamentals by outside groups helps to impart a greater understanding of ethics. Still, the close-knit exile community leads to much overlap in membership among smaller activist and media organizations. The larger organizations such as The Irrawaddy and Mizzima (whose name translates roughly as "Middle Ground" in Pali language), meanwhile, have set up stronger standards of editorial review and balance, if not outright neutrality.

A Friendly Audience

¶24. In a refreshing take for U.S. diplomats interacting with foreign media, the exile journalist community here remains steadfastly pro-American. Groups such as DVB and The Irrawaddy continually seek more input from U.S. officials and make frequent use of interviews, press releases and audio clips posted on USG websites. A live interview with a U.S. diplomat is a prized commodity, one even capable of stoking a healthy competition among rival news organizations to land a scoop. A 2006 Irrawaddy interview with EAP DAS Eric John multiplied into several articles and circulated widely throughout the exile community and mainstream media.

¶25. USG funding plays some role in this goodwill, but much of it comes from strong pro-democracy positions on Burma over the years. Still, with USG money coming into these organizations via NED, OSI, and others, there is a strong reliance on donor funding for these groups' continued existence. Even the largest media, such as the Irrawaddy, take in little advertising revenue, and are not viable businesses.

¶26. COMMENT: It is encouraging to see such a healthy interest in a free media and civil society prosper. The fiscal longevity of these organizations remains heavily reliant on Western funding, but there is no shortage of local exiles and young activists within Burma eager to sign up for Thailand-based training programs and become the next generation of Burma's free media.

¶27. Like many of their political colleagues involved in governments-in-exile, these Burmese journalists have created a parallel existence in Thailand to one that they cannot have in Burma. There are important aspects of a future "united Burma" in their interactions with each other worth noting - such as the potential for cooperation balanced against occasional ethnic mistrust, as well as the struggle to maintain contact and relevance with a home many left two decades ago. Rivalries and frustrations do exist, both among the exile community and between them and their counterparts inside Burma, who take great risks to communicate with those on the outside. But the common goal of getting information about the SPDC's misrule out into the larger world hopefully serves as an effectively uniting force to enhance cooperation to report timely, accurate, and provoking news. End Comment.

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